

October 10, 2007

To: the Scientific Board of the Grand Challenges in Global Health

10/15/07

From: Harold Varmus, Chair of the Board

I am writing to the Scientific Board on my way home from Cape Town to provide a very brief summary of this week's excellent meeting of the GCGH grantees. The report is also intended to encourage all of you to block off time on your calendars to attend next year's meeting in Bangkok, scheduled to be held from October \_\_ to \_\_, 2008.

At this third annual meeting, we heard reports of the first two years of work by all of the grantees. Since there were two or three concurrent sessions during most of the meeting, no one was able to hear more than about half of the presentations. But at our Board meeting following the conference, there was general agreement that the vast majority of the research programs are on track, that several have exceeded expectations and are producing truly exciting results, and that only a few are having serious trouble meeting their milestones. Although we are not yet half way through the funding period for most grants, the Board emerged with confidence that many of the objectives of the GCGH initiative will be met----both primary objectives (the generation of important new knowledge and the delivery of some potentially useful products) and secondary ones as well (the formation of effective multi-laboratory collaborations and the enhancement of global health research in several countries). (A summary of the progress made by each of the grantees is available in the excellent briefing book prepared for the Scientific Board and available to all members, whether or not they were able to travel to Cape Town.)

At its lengthy but invigorating final session, the Board also provided advice about a number of important questions facing the four agencies that fund the initiative.

- First, we discussed in detail the handful of research programs that have experienced significant scientific or procedural problems. At least one Board member has been involved in helping to correct the difficulties with each of these programs. In addition, the program officers from the BMGF and the FNIH provided summaries of the problems, both in the briefing books and orally at our meeting. As a result, we were sufficiently informed

to make recommendations about how each of the less successful grantees should be managed during the coming year. In one case, an award has already terminated, and a few grantees have been warned that they may be subject to budget reductions or termination if they continue to fail to reach milestones.

- Second, we considered how to respond to complaints that a few speakers were unwilling to divulge important aspects of their results during the sessions. These investigators claimed to be constrained because the information might be subject to patent protection in the future. Several means to avoid this situation were suggested and will be further evaluated before next year's meeting to insure open exchange.
- Third, we talked about some instances in which potentially important ethical and cultural conflicts have been tackled by Peter Singer and his Toronto colleagues in consultation with the grantees. (The advantages of anticipating such conflicts by supporting the Toronto team within the GCGH initiative were repeatedly displayed during the meeting.)
- Finally, there was considerable conversation about the evolution of the GCGH initiative. During the meeting, Tachi Yamada announced that the Gates Foundation would launch an exciting new Innovation Grants program in 2008, and that this initiative could lead to the definition of new Grand Challenges. (For a description of this new program, see <http://www.gcgh.org/GrandChallenges/GCNewFeature/default.htm>.) Although no final decisions were made, it was generally agreed that the existing GCGH grants would not likely be renewed for an additional term; in order for teams to continue their projects, they would usually need to seek alternative sources of funding. But we also proposed that some grantees might be given one or two year extensions, if there is strong likelihood of achieving a significant endpoint in a limited amount of additional time. Such decisions, of course, would be dependent on funds available from the supporting agencies.

We also discussed the question of whether additional members should now be added to the Board. There is clearly an advantage to working with Board members who have been involved from the earliest stage of the initiative: they have a strong sense of what the grants are intended to achieve, and they are familiar with many of the roughly 44 programs. Moreover, very few people have left the Board (Rick Klausner, who was replaced by Tachi

Yamada, and, more recently, Julio Frenk, who asked to step down because he has become a senior advisor to the Gates Foundation.). We also had fairly good attendance at this meeting. (Thirteen of the 24 members were present, and nearly all of the thirteen stayed from beginning to end.) So there may not be a compelling need for additional members. But there was general agreement that the presence of an even larger cohort at the meetings is important to promote interactions with the grantees and to guarantee informed discussion of progress in the many areas of supported research.

We will soon be polling the current SB members to find out whether you intend to come to the Bangkok meeting, whether you think we should add new members, and whether you have some specific people to nominate. We would also like to know if you have suggestions for places to hold the fifth meeting (in 2009, the year after the already planned Bangkok meeting). This question was brought up at our concluding dinner, and the recommendations included a number of cities in South American or Mexico, other venues in Africa (including East African cities and Alexandria), some cities in India or China, and a couple of European cities. In other words, many places are on the table, and now is the time to voice your suggestions. The sixth (and possibly final) meeting will almost certainly be in Seattle.

Before concluding this memo, I want to insure that all members of the Board recognize what was very apparent to those of us who attended the meeting in Cape Town: the program managers have done an extraordinary job of directing the GCGH initiative. This job means, above all, working with the grantees, monitoring their progress, identifying problems with intellectual property and ethical, social, and cultural issues, and providing extra expert advice when needed. Furthermore, the meeting itself was run superbly well, with strong scientific sessions, stimulating discussions, and fascinating external speakers---including Archbishop Emeritus and Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu; Njongonkulu Ndungane, the current Archbishop of Cape Town; Ann Veneman, the Director of UNICEF; and Graca Machel (Nelson Mandela's wife and the head of the GAVI Board). In addition, the meeting was arranged to allow attendance at a Keystone meeting on vaccines, trips to South African research sites, and workshops on a variety of topics. These are all reasons to believe that Bangkok will also be superb. Please plan to come.

Thank you and feel free to contact me or the participating organizations with any questions or comments.